

# TRANSFORMING TEACHERS, TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS: Turning "Sages" Into "Guides On The Side"

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## ABSTRACT

Many teachers teach the way they were taught. If asked to explain why they lecture to their students, the response is often, "My teachers wrote on the board and I took notes. It worked for me." Brain research indicates that other techniques increase blood flow to parts of the brain associated with cognition. This presentation provides anecdotal evidence about the impact of this research when applied to a single classroom or in online classes. When a teacher becomes a "guide on the side," there is a change in the school's culture that can be measured. This presentation is extracted from a newly published book, *Let's Lecture Less*, edited by Steve McCreA ([Visualandactive.com](http://Visualandactive.com)) and Mario Joel Llorente Leyva.

**Keywords:** teacher mindset; instructor training; Dennis Littky; student engagement; project-based learning; ebooks; transfer responsibility.

## INTRODUCTION

The idea for the website [GuideontheSide.com](http://GuideontheSide.com) and book *Guide On the Side* came when I realized that students were clamoring to get into my classes (I was teaching an intensive three-week English language program in Fort Lauderdale). Three teachers (who were escorting their students from Italy) asked to sit in my lessons. They took notes. Something was going on here. Something I had done or read had changed me so that my classes were somehow magnetic. This article shares with you what happened to me.

I was a lecturer for much of my teaching career. From 1996 to 2005, I worked as a teacher of English to adults and I spent every class giving lectures. Then I heard a remarkable interview on National Public Radio with Dennis Littky, founder of the Met Center in Providence, Rhode Island, USA. "Until we learn what the student's passions and interests, it's just school. After we start teaching to the student's passions and interests, there is nothing to stop them from wanting to learn more and to connect the schoolwork to their future lives" (Littky, 2004, page 34).

### Dennis Littky's Seven Points

Go to the website of Littky's school, [MetCenter.org](http://MetCenter.org), or search "NPR Littky April 2005." You will have the direct experience that I did and you'll want to put into practice the seven key points mentioned by Littky:

- students learn through projects;
- teachers get to know the students (eating dinner at least once every two months in their homes);
- teachers teach every subject (yes, math teachers teach literature, science teachers teach art, French teachers teach math and science);
- quotes are placed on walls to encourage random learning;
- tests are "stand-up" exhibitions; students go on internships and report back to the school what they learned;
- every student writes a 75-page biography about their family members (we all need to know where we came from, what our families did and how they got here); and

- grading is with a narrative every eight weeks (a kid said, "I'm more than a letter in the alphabet," and that inspired Littky to require teachers to write and talk to kids about what they did, how they could improve their work and what will be the next challenge in the next eight weeks).

Daniel Pink (2011), the award-winning author of books about business trends, gives similar educational advice: The key themes about what motivates students and people in general are autonomy, mastery and purpose, not a higher grade-point-average or other extrinsic factors. Guides on the side must choose instead to teach toward inner values.

### **GREAT TEACHERS ARE BORN, NOT MADE (OH?)**

One way to become a great "guide on the side" is to stop preaching and teaching and instead listen better (Postman, 1969). Become a facilitator, arrange the classroom to follow the principles that Littky demonstrates, that Dennis Yuzenas (a teacher in West Palm Beach, Florida) uses, that dozens of innovative schools have as part of their curriculum. It's not WHAT is taught but rather how students are encouraged to find ways to get the material presented to them.

Ken Robinson (2009) points out that a class of seven-year-olds will all put up their hands if you ask, "Who likes to draw?" Ask the same question in a class of 16-year-olds and only a minority will raise their hands. Hmmm. How has the school so effectively weeded out the drive to create?

Here are techniques to encourage creativity that Gerald Aungst (2011) recommends:

**Plant the seed.** Instead of a vague "be creative," tell someone, "give me an idea that only you could come up with."

**Make it messy.** Creativity is squashed when people feel like they are looking for one right answer. For students, give them problems that have multiple solutions

**Never accept the first answer.** It sets an expectation that one answer, even if it works, isn't the end of the process but just the beginning.

**Teach creativity techniques.** Techniques can give people a concrete handle on something that can seem abstract and complicated.

**Reverse the roles.** Instead of giving an assignment to students, ask them to tell you what they would do if they were the teacher.

**Get out.** Changing the location of the class can change students' thinking (from Aungst's blog).

### **EBOOKS**

Teachers who are not familiar with project-based learning or with constructivist approaches (that build the curriculum around the individual student) might ask, "But how do students get the information if I'm not lecturing to them? Who will present the information?"

Read Abraham Fischler's description of the role of the computer in the classroom (computer-assisted instruction or CAI):

**Our schools will turn out to be better schools if we design the schools and the curriculum to be more responsive to the client. Right now most of our schools are responsive to the class. Unless we change the organization and structure, there are limits to how we can do better with one teacher and 25 or 22 students. The teacher is teaching the 22 or 25 students as a class. But with the introduction of technology that is responsive to the student, then you can open up the class to make time the variable.**

**It's not a major shift. We're just utilizing modern technology instead of the teacher as the presenter of core information. CAI also gives students even when they are not at the same level the opportunity to form groups. We make sure that each group has a responsive, bright kid, who can give leadership to the group of three. Everyone in the group ought to be able to provide some input to the resolution of what they are working on.**

**These are not profound changes. Teachers can't continue to be the presenters to the class because not everyone in the class is ready to receive what the teachers say. When talking about English and Math (and certain aspects of social studies and science), the students are generally at different levels of comprehension because they are individuals and they have different talents and they learn at different rates. It's simple. If you know that people have different talents and learn at different rates, why wouldn't you make the student the class? (excerpted from [TheStudentIsTheClass.com](http://TheStudentIsTheClass.com) by A. S. Fischler).**

**Other sources of information are videos, ebooks and audio CDs. Why not do what many professors at Stanford University are doing and put your lectures on videos and send them home with your students? Students are expected to review the videos before the class and arrive reading to discuss the themes of the day (Fellet, 2011).**

**Class time turns into "Question and Answer" sessions where students "perform their understanding" (Howard Gardner's term) and the teacher checks for misconceptions.**

## **SEVENTEEN QUOTATIONS**

**Perhaps the most effective strategy that emerged from my classroom is the use of quotations. Instead of asking students to change their behaviors, I presented these quotations to the students.**

**After they had studied the quotations, several students asked that I continue with the "new" method of letting them decide individually what they would work on during the week. Less lecturing, more independent projects; fewer tests, more exhibitions ("stand up and deliver some information").**

**Here are some quotes that guide me in becoming a facilitator.**

**"The teacher of the future is a GUIDE on the SIDE, not a sage on the stage."  
Aphorism**

**"Education is NOT the filling of a pail, but rather the LIGHTING of a FIRE"  
Yeats, also attributed to Plutarch**

**"Most students might forget what you taught them, but they will always remember how you treated them." -- often stated in teacher-training seminars.  
"I never let school get in the way of my education." Mark Twain**

**"Drive out fear." W. Edwards Deming**

**"Keep Talking Time" to a minimum."**

**- dictum in the CELTA teacher training course**

**"Schools teach children to obey. But we need creative answers to the challenges of our times. Many of the people who've had the greatest influence on our times were failures in school."  
Ken Robinson**

**"The greatest sign of success for a teacher is to be able to say, The children are now working as if I did not exist." Maria Montessori**

**"Let's create people who are capable of doing new things, not simply of repeating what other generations have done." Jean Piaget**

**"Innovative schools offer small classes, individualized instruction, and flexible curricula which can accommodate the child. The same teacher stays with the same group of children for as many as eight grades. The teacher has to grow and learn with the children." Dennis Littky**

**"Many teachers believe that they need to control how they teach and how they test. Other teachers negotiate with their students what they will learn, when they will learn it and how we will check that they have learned it."**

**"Unfortunately, to most people, teaching is the giving of knowledge. What are you going to tell the students? What is your expertise? But teaching is really about bringing out what's already inside people." Dennis Littky**

**"If individuals have different kinds of minds, with varied strengths, interests and strategies, then could biology, math and history be taught AND ASSESSED in a variety of ways?" Howard Gardner**

**"Trust. Truth. No Put-downs. Active Listening. Personal Best."**

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## **CONCLUSION**

**Become an ex-teacher. Become a facilitator. Read these quotations daily with your students (in online classes, distribute one or two of the quotations and ask students to reflect on how we can apply procedures in the class to meet the aims of the quotations). Paste the words on walls (or in email messages) and ask students to rewrite the ideas in their own words. "Let's gradually transfer the responsibility for their learning to the students" (a quotation by John Gardner). NO MORE BORING LESSONS. Let's see how transforming one teacher can transform a school. Observe what happens, write your anecdotal evidence and send your observations to [TheGuideOnTheSide@gmail.com](mailto:TheGuideOnTheSide@gmail.com). Spread this virus of guiding on the side.**

## **BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESSES of the AUTHOR**

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**He is currently coordinating the translation of his book *Let's Lecture Less* (which prints pieces of his website [www.GuideontheSide.com](http://www.GuideontheSide.com)) into eight languages. He wrote a curriculum for a project-based learning high school ([QBESchool.com](http://QBESchool.com)). Eight people have taken his online workshop to become qualified as Visual and Active Teachers (VATT). He is a doctoral student at Nova Southeastern University.**

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